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PROVERBIAL MORALITY.

By proverbial morality I understand those maxims of conduct which have reached the dignity of expression in a popular phrase, and may thus be said to have become an integral part of the common thought and speech of men. While such maxims do not mark the first stage of the moral consciousness, they have some claim to be regarded as the earliest expression of reflective morality, constituting as they do a deliberate attempt to establish a standard by reference to which particular actions may be judged. These rules do not indeed admit of the universal application which is characteristic of a scientific law or a philosophical principle, but they do display the same measure and kind of generality as belongs to a typical instance or example, and they cast a similar light upon a definite portion of the field of experience. Like a picture or book or poem they set life in a special point of view and seek to adjust and estimate its details from some consciousness of the meaning of the whole.

Further, these moral rules not only indicate the beginning of ethical theory, they mark also the highest point which most men ever attain in the apprehension of moral principles. The ordinary consciousness in its judgments upon conduct seldom gets beyond an appeal to one of these popular saws. For while all men can appreciate and apply the truth embodied in such phrases as "Honesty is the best policy," "Pride goes before a fall," "Look before you leap," only a few minds can rise to the conception of a general principle as determining what should be virtuous and vicious. General conceptions of right and wrong, of good and evil exercise their sway over a comparatively narrow circle of persons and actions, but maxims of conduct have gained a recognition that is practically universal. For though few can think general ideas as to the nature of conduct in a concrete way, or understand the content and validity of particular duties better in and through these, practically all men do apply to their own and others' actions the rules which

embody "the wisdom of all and the wit of one." Common consent and approval have thus lent sanction to their authority and weight to their counsels.

Proverbs also have proved themselves to possess a vitality and a permanence which belong only to that which ministers to a real need in man's life. In this respect they may be contrasted with so-called folk-lore which has been less successful in maintaining its hold over men's minds. The one has not become antiquated or obsolete, while the other has. In the one case the growth of knowledge has been fatal, while in the other it has been productive of strength and stimulus by forcing proverbial wisdom to adapt itself to changing conditions of life, and thus enabling it to lay firmer hold upon men's thoughts and affections. Thus we cannot simply dismiss it as an early and temporary phase of human belief which is bound to disappear as science and philosophy extend their sway. On the contrary it would seem that the popular saws and maxims about conduct have to be reckoned with as a permanent form in which man's thought and endeavor express themselves. For this reason they deserve more consideration and study than they have yet received, and the aim of this paper is to call attention to some of the main features characteristic of them.

First of all, it may be noted that proverbial literature abounds in counsels of caution and restraint, and is much richer in warning and reproof than in inspiration or stimulus. One of its chief aims is to fence all the dangerous places where man's foot is apt to slip, and it does this most effectually by furnishing a vivid representation of the follies, vices, weaknesses and besetting sins of humanity. But with this its function begins and ends. It does not try to wean men from devotion to the less worthy objects of desire by setting before them the attractions of a more complete good. It is content to point out the risks which attach to certain courses of conduct, and to dwell on the dangers that attend all human existence and effort. The shortness and uncertainty of life, the inconstancy of fortune, the vanity and unprofitableness of much that man desires, the narrowness of his knowledge, the insta-

bility of his will, the manifold causes of fear, unrest and disappointment which may play upon him, these are the main topics with which the ordinary moral maxims deal. If more positive counsels are not absent, it is the conditioned and relative nature of all that man attempts and accomplishes which forms the burden of its message to the world. "Never halloo till you are out of the wood." "Second thoughts are best." "One man's meat is another man's poison." "All is not gold that glitters." "Procrastination is the thief of time."

This sense of the limitations of human life, of the narrowness of the bounds within which safety lies, the manifoldness of the dangers which encompass all action, gives to much of our proverbial morality a tone of pessimism and even of cynicism. In this respect it stands supreme and unapproached. It has a cap for every fool, a wise saw for every imprudent action, a rod of correction for every sinner. At all points it is armed to match itself against whatever chances and mischances life may present. It has a kind of omniscience which prevents it ever being taken unawares, and a universal adaptability which enables it to meet every change of circumstances with a fresh front.

Moreover the fact that proverbial wisdom adopts in the main a negative role and is content to play the part of critic and judge, gives additional sanction and security to the exercise of its function. Since it is not called upon to be wise before the event, but only to enforce the issue which experience has already declared, it occupies the strong position of one who is ever on the winning side. No doubt even a negative and critical attitude does imply a positive and directing one. But if the former is always made explicit, and the latter constantly kept in the background, criticism seems able to use its weapons without apprehension of having them turned against itself. This is one reason why the wisdom of ordinary moral maxims appeals to us as so convincing after an action has been done, while yet it is of such a nature as to be quite unfitted for determining what should be done or for pointing out the best way of doing it. He who is content to prophesy only after the event, or to pass sentence only where judgment has gone before,

or to point the moral which the tale has already established, enjoys a position of much security. And it is this position which most of our popular moral maxims do occupy. They reserve their strength for giving effect to conclusions which experience has first made sure, and so they escape the criticism which they themselves are ready to apply.

Further, proverbs are not general truths. They appear and seek to be so; but their form and their matter are inconsistent. The essence of a proverb is a concrete image suggestive of a general idea. It is an attempt to embody a universal truth in a particular case. And the image or metaphor is the only proof that is given of the general principle. This is at once the strength and the weakness of such maxims as guides of conduct. They are short, sharp appeals to experience. They offer no reasoned proof and suggest no doubts. Indeed they are successful in making good their place in the common consciousness of men precisely in proportion as they present themselves as self-complete and self-evidencing. Whenever they fail to produce an immediate conviction of their truth they have lost their virtue; for it is just the apparent identity between the general principle and the particular image which constitutes their peculiar value. Take, as an instance, the proverb "A chain is not stronger than its weakest link." No assertion could be less questionable, and no proof more conclusive. Whence comes its effectiveness? Simply from the success with which it gives to our thought the definite embodiment of a metaphor which not only seems adequate to the thought, but which also renders any other conclusion inconceivable. One cannot even suppose that a chain should be stronger than its weakest link. And the essential virtue of the proverb is that it has fused a general truth with a particular image so perfectly that this truth and this image appear not two but one. It is only reflection which enables us to dissolve the union, and to discern that the general and the particular are not perfectly at one. For the general principle, that the strength of a whole is no greater than the strength of its weakest part, no longer appears self-evident if we picture the whole not as a chain, but as a bundle of sticks, an army of soldiers, a river or a house. The bundle of faggots

is stronger than its weakest part, stronger even than its strongest component; and under this change of metaphor we find it possible to apprehend that there may be another side to the truth, that "union may be strength," and that each constituent may find its particular strength multiplied indefinitely.

Proverbial maxims then give striking expression to some one aspect of life, and they achieve immortality just in proportion as they are able to wed form and matter in a way which makes these appear inseparable. Their excellence is not the breadth of outlook upon life which they furnish, but the vivid picture of a single aspect of it which each of them presents.

Yet in spite of the narrowness and partial nature of the views of conduct which proverbial morality expresses, it has succeeded in keeping its hold over men's minds. How has it been able to respond so well to the demands made upon it? The explanation seems to me to consist in its many-sidedness and catholicity on the one hand, and its unsystematic character on the other. Not only has it kept itself open to the teachings of experience, but its indifference to leading conceptions has allowed it to embrace the most diverse views without any feeling of inconsistency. In many respects this has been advantageous. It has rendered such literature all the more perfect as the mirror of life. It has helped to keep constantly before men's minds the wholeness and complexity of the problem to be solved, and it has prevented an easy and premature attempt to unify the varied phases of action, ere thought was able to embrace its manifoldness in a concrete way.

It might seem indeed that any reading of experience which involves the recognition of diverse principles and points of view must stand a self-confessed failure. Much more is this the case if the principles it admits are not only different, but opposed to, and inconsistent with, one another. For what claim to authority can belong to any court which is not at unity with itself? And the charge of being thus self-divided can, it seems to me, be both brought and maintained against proverbial morality. On almost any question it speaks with two voices, and is equally ready to recommend opposite courses of conduct.

Consider, for example, such a maxim as "Take care of the

pence and the pounds will take care of themselves." The observance of this rule would involve that attention to the smaller duties and needs of life would necessarily bring about proper devotion to its larger ones. Yet suppose one did follow it, and, taking care of the pence, allowed the pounds to take care of themselves, the result would not be by any means admirable. And the fact that folly may lurk in this course no less than in the other is already recognized in the precisely opposite proverb which pillories those who have too great faith in this maxim as a rule of conduct, and are "penny wise, pound foolish."

Again, the proverb, "Seeing is believing," seems quite indisputable, and even all-sufficient in its guidance, until the truth that seeing is not always believing is brought before us in the contrary maxim "All is not gold that glitters." The confidence begotten of the conviction that "Well begun is half-ended" is tempered by the counsel "Never halloo till you are out of the wood." And the encouragement to industry which springs from the maxim "Procrastination is the thief of time" is qualified by the assurance that "Everything comes to him who waits." The comfort to be derived from the thought that "It is a long lane that has no turning" is rather damped by remembering that "It never rains but it pours." While the opposite assertions that "Out of sight is out of mind," and that "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" are well fitted to act as the correctives of a one-sided faith. "What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander" appears less conclusive when we remember that "One man's meat is another man's poison." And the belief that "Fortune favors the brave" has also to reconcile itself with the fact that "Fortune favors fools."

I hesitate to assert that every popular maxim can be thus met by an other and opposite one, but most of them, I believe, can be. What hides this fact from us is simply the difference of the images or metaphors through which the opposing aspects of the truth are expressed. Hence proverbial wisdom reflects not only the many-sidedness of human experience, but also the contradictions and perplexities which life presents, and it does this with all the greater fullness and impartiality that it is itself unaware of the antagonism of its parts.

For this reason the disharmony between the various maxims of popular morality has not proved fatal to its usefulness. Self-consistency is not a *sine qua non* of all efficiency. Rules of conduct may be sound and suggestive though they are formally at variance with one another. In the case of a system of philosophy, no doubt, the conflict of the parts detracts sadly from the value of the whole; but when a collection of rules is in question, such a defect is much less serious. For the aim of such a collection is to enable us to give telling expression to the special aspect of conduct which is prominent or important at the moment rather than to co-ordinate and unify the manifold aspects which changing moods and circumstances may present. And the unsystematic character of proverbial literature, instead of proving fatal to its general acceptance, has frequently been its safeguard when more ambitious attempts to read the riddle of human life have proved wanting. For, by depicting with photographic accuracy the manifoldness and variety of the elements that enter into conduct, it has been able to keep before men in a permanent way the breadth and complexity of the moral problem to be solved.

Thus in spite of the somewhat prudential motives to which it appeals, and the self-conflicting nature of its various counsels, the maxims of proverbial morality have proved of great and essential service in human endeavor after better and more complete forms of existence. They have helped to maintain amid the fickleness of desire the balance and sanity of man's thought and volition, because they have been ready and able under all conditions to force to the front the aspects and elements of action that have been neglected or crowded out under the pressure of other interests. In this way they have done much to further the development of the moral consciousness, even while they have seemed to be fighting against its unity and harmony. For while they are themselves unprepared with any satisfactory reconciliation of the discordant features of moral experience, they can bring into play against every partial conception a very effective dialectic. And in thus quickening the pulse of ordinary thought, and saving it from the stagnation into which its own want of vigor is apt to betray it, they have

performed a function of great value and interest. As a universal irritant they have prevented men finding rest in those half-truths, contentment with which is ever the worst of lies.

Thus if the ideal of conduct which most popular maxims present is not of a very high type, it is at least a many-sided and self-corrective one. It is at war with extremes, and has on the whole a healthy instinct for the middle way. Hence it supplies excellent foraging ground for any theory that would prove its adequacy to the needs and desires of humanity. For unless such a theory can embrace the varied aspects of good which popular moral maxims set forth so graphically, it cannot claim to present a higher truth than they do. From this point of view even the chastened sobriety of judgment which refuses to indulge in any large expectations, and is critical of all enthusiasms, is serviceable in securing the sterling worth of any doctrine which pretends to set up a higher ideal of life. For the practical good sense which can avoid extremes, and can discern that success in every field involves the recognition of limits, and can see what in each particular case is the nature of these limits of successful action, this good sense is not the enemy of ideal views of life, but the necessary condition of their conception and realization.

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